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Christian Duty in the Present Time of Trouble.

A SERMON

PREACHED AT

ST. JAMES' CHURCH,

WILMINGTON, N. C.,

ON THE

Fifth Sunday after Easter. 1861.

BY THE

RIGHT REV. THOMAS ATKINSON, D. D.,

BISHOP OF NORTH CAROLINA.

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CORRESPONDENCE:

WILMINGTON, MAY 6th, 1861.

RT. REV. THOS. ATKINSON,—*Dear Sir:*

We enjoyed the privilege of hearing the Sermon delivered by you at St. James' Church, on Sunday last, and being assured that its publication would be productive of great good, we beg you will consent to furnish us with a copy for the purpose indicated.

Most respectfully,

THOS. D. WALKER,
THOS. W. BROWN,
J. H. FLANNER,
THOS. H. HARDIN,
J. E. LIPPITT,
WM. A. BERRY,
WALKER MEARES,
WM. A. WRIGHT,
JAMES S. GREEN,
L. LANE,
W. H. LIPPITT,
A. MARTIN,
JAMES G. BURR,
D. S. COWAN.

WILMINGTON, MAY 10th, 1861.

Messieurs THOMAS D. WALKER, W. A. WRIGHT and others,—

Gentlemen :—The Sermon you ask for is at your service, and I am truly pleased that the line of conduct it recommends should approve itself to the judgment of persons whose opinions have so much weight as yours; and who, I believe, were not able altogether to agree on some of the preliminary questions connected with our present troubles.

I remain, with great respect and regard,

Faithfully, your friend,

THOMAS ATKINSON.

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A SERMON.

"Blesed is the man that endureth temptation; for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him."—*St. James, first Chapter, 12th Verse.*

We stand to-day, dear brethren, in the midst of circumstances of great doubt and anxiety, with provocations tending to kindle the bitterest and most vehement passions, and with the line of duty in many instances difficult to trace, and difficult to follow, even when traced. Never did we stand more in need of right counsels, deliberate and conscientious reflection, earnest purpose to do our duty, and heartfelt dependence on God our Saviour, for guidance and strength to enable us for its performance. We stand to-day, face to face with civil war, a calamity, which, unless the experience and universal testimony of mankind deceive us, is direr and more to be deprecated than foreign war, than famine, than pestilence, than any other form of public evil. The cloud we have all been so long watching, which we have seen, day by day, and month by month, enlarging its skirts, and gathering blackness, is now beginning to burst upon us.

It seems to me that no one but an Atheist, or an Epicurean, can doubt that it is God who rides in this storm, and will direct the whirlwind, and that He now calls upon us to look to Him, to consider our ways and our doings, to remember the offences by which we have heretofore provoked Him, and to determine on the conduct we will hereafter pursue towards Him, towards our fellowmen, and towards ourselves.

I feel that we have some solid grounds of encouragement to hope for His favour. This Commonwealth, with whose fortunes our own

are linked, cannot be said to have had any hand in causing, or pretcipitating the issue before us. She has sought, till the last momen, to avert it, and she has incurred censure by these efforts. But when compelled to elect between furnishing troops to subdue her nearest neighbors and kindred, and to open her Territory for the passage of armies marshalled to accomplish that odious, unauthorized and unhallowed object, or to refuse to aid, and to seek to hinder such attempts, she chose the part which affection, and interest and duty seems manifestly, and beyond all reasonable question, to require. What she has done, and is about to do, she does, as an old writer finely says in such a case, "willingly, but with an unwilling mind," as an imperative, but painful duty. Such is the temper, we may be well assured, in which it best pleases God, that strife of any sort, especially strife of this sort, should be entered on.

There is another consideration from which I derive great comfort, and which is certain to give comfort to all who receive it. It is that whatever we may think of some of the earlier steps in these disputes, yet as to the present questions between the North and the South, we can calmly, conscientiously, and, I think, conclusively, to all impartial men, maintain before God and man that *now* at least we of the South are in the right. For we are on the defensive, we ask only to be let alone. That old Union to which we were all at one time so deeply attached, is now dissolved. It cannot be, at this time, amicably reconstructed. No one proposes it shall be done—no one supposes it can be done. Shall there then be a voluntary and friendly separation, or an attempt at subjugation. This is really the question before the people, lately known as the people of the United States. How strange that there should be any doubt as to the answer!! That men should hesitate which to prefer, a peaceful separation of those who cannot agree, or civil war, with all its horrors, and all its uncertain issues!! We ask the former—those so lately our brethren demand the latter. Should they insist on this, and should they succeed in this detestable strife to the very height of their hopes, it would be worse than a barren victory. It would be a victory that would cost the conquerors not only mate-

rial prosperity, but the very principles of government on which society with them, as with us, rests.

I cannot then doubt, and it seems a singular hallucination that any man should mistake, the righteous cause in this present most lamentable controversy, and I hope and I believe that God will bless with temporal success the righteous cause. He may not, however, for He does not always see fit to make right visibly triumphant.—But succeed or not, it is the cause on the side of which one would desire to be found. Yet, however this thought may cheer us, we cannot disguise from ourselves that success, should we obtain it, will not probably be reached until after an arduous and painful struggle, involving severe trials of the feelings, and of the character of the community, and of ourselves individually. And no man yet knows how he shall meet these trials. The most self-confident are usually the first to fail. "Let not him that girdeth on his armour boast himself as he that taketh it off."

Since, then, a searching trial seems to await us, let us, in God's strength, endeavor to prepare for it, and in order thereto, listen with obedient faith to the instructions of that holy man, whose righteousness was so exemplary that Jews, as well as Christians, knew him by the name of James the Just. "Blessed, says he, is the man that endureth temptation, for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him."

Temptation or Trial (for they mean the the same thing) comes to man in two forms, Prosperity or Adversity, of which the former is the more generally dangerous. Prosperity tempts us by inclining us to forget God, and to love the world which so smiles upon us, by slackening the reins on the necks of our appetites and passions, by opening the door to vices which our very circumstances might otherwise shut out from us, by nourishing selfishness, by deadening sympathy, and by weakening faith. Great prosperity has been the ruin of many countries, and of many men in every country. It has surely been the occasion of a large part of our present miseries. Never in the history of the world was there such

a rapid advance made by any people in all the elements of power, abundance and splendor, as was made by this nation in the last forty years. We passed, as in a day, from national childhood to a most robust and formidable manhood. We were the admiration, the envy, the wonder, and I may say, the fear of all other people.—England and France bore that from us which they never would have endured from each other. It was not of our Army and Navy that they stood in awe, but they were reluctant to give umbrage to a people who fed their commerce, and upheld their manufactures. With this influence abroad, when we looked at home we saw villages growing up in a few years into great cities, a soil which to-day was a quaking morass, to-morrow sustaining immense blocks of buildings, warehouses bursting with their stores, dwellings not merely provided with comfort, but decorated with splendor, and this not in one or two favored spots, as sometimes in Europe, but on the contrary, we saw vast territories where the Buffalo roamed, and the Deer bounded, and the form of man had not appeared, except as the Indian was observed marching along his war-path, or the solitary trapper gathering his furs; we saw these wild regions changed almost as in the shifting scenes at a Theatre, into great, rich and populous States. Astonished Europe heard year by year, that another million had been added to the numbers of the mighty Republic, and that its agriculture and commerce, and manufactures were increasing even more rapidly than its population. Then came the Mexican war, like another volume of steam, and made the rush and roar of our rapid progress still more astounding. Then came more and more of gold and glory, and expanding territory.

We have been tried by prosperity as no nation ever was tried before, and we have yielded to temptation as completely and unresistingly as any people ever did. Those old stories we have all read were outdone. Rome corrupted by the conquest of Greece and of Asia, Spain demoralized by the subjugation of the Indies, were prophetic of our destiny. Our material prosperity, swift as was its advance, did not keep pace with our moral deterioration. Within the memory of any middle-aged man we were regarded in Europe

as rigidly, perhaps ridiculously precise and scrupulous in morals and manners. No one dreams of this being our character at present. In one single state, and that a small one, the number of suicides average annually nearly a hundred. What the number of *homicides* is, no statist, I presume, would undertake to tell. This we know, that if the the blood of man, shed by his fellow-man calls to God for vengeance, the cry that pierces the ear of the Lord of Hosts from our land ceases not day or night. Need I say any thing of other forms of vice—drunkenness, lewdness, gaming, fraud, bribery, peculation, public and private? And with this such lawlessness, such haughtiness, such self-glorification! Who that looks abroad on our country, can read without a shudder, the prophetic language of St. Paul in that last Epistle written from Nero's Dungeon with the axe and block at hand, when with purged eye he reads the signs of the last times, and thus describes them: "This know also, that in the last days, perilous times shall come, for men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, *disobedient to parents*, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, truce-breakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God."

Is there a trait in this dark picture, to which our country does not furnish a living likeness! We have been tried by prosperity then, and we have not stood *that trial.* It seems clear that God is now about to withdraw, at least for a time, the favours we have so abused, to try us with calamity. There is no man this day in that wide land which was called the United States, who does not know trouble and affliction. It has come to us all, in some form or other, and to many in many forms. See how our national wealth, which was so dear to the national heart, is disappearing!! Whose property has not, within a few months, been reduced in value, a fourth, or a half, whatever his personal care or diligence may be. The idolaters of money are crying out like Micah of old, "Ye have taken away my God, and what have I left!" Indeed who knows now how much property any man has! This time of trouble, like

the grave, levels all distinctions, and rich and poor meet together. Factories and shops are closed, schools are deserted, churches are thinned, in every family the husband, or the father, or the son, or the brother has marched, or is preparing to march to the uncertain issues of the seige, or the battle-field. Thus we stand to-day.—How or where we shall stand three or six months hence no human wisdom can inform us. And how shall we bear what may await us? As yet but a few drops have fallen on us from the cloud, how will it be when its full fury is upon us? "If thou hast run with the footmen, says the man of God, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses? and if in the land of peace wherein thou trustedst they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?" Let us then remember that we are now entering into a time of temptation, and of very severe temptation, and that temptation does not necessarily do any man good, but may do him great harm, while, however, the *endurance* of temptation will do him the greatest good, "for when thus tried, he shall receive the crown of life." Everything which comes to us from God, is in some sense a temptation; that is, tries us, reveals our character, and brings us a benefit, or an injury, according to the use we make of it. The sunshine which ripens the sound fruit, rots the unsound. The storm which prostrates the decayed oak, sends deeper into the soil the roots of the living and healthy. So with ourselves. Health, wealth, wisdom, power, life itself is a blessing or a curse, according to the use we make of it. So it is with trouble and calamity. They are medicines in the hands of the Great Physician, but we may so receive them, as that to us, they shall become poison. Affliction, alas, often hardens men's hearts, makes them unthankful and rebellious against God, envious and malignant towards their fellow-man. The worst men on earth are those who have passed through the extremes of the two conditions, who have known nothing but unbroken prosperity, or unmitigated misery. On the other hand, the best men the world has ever seen, are those who have borne great affliction, and by God's grace have endured the trial. Such were Noah, Daniel and Job, the

Prophets and Apostles, the great Saints, and the blessed Martyrs, while on the other hand, vice has never been so shameless, and so pitiless as in times of great public and private calamity, such as the destruction of Jerusalem, the plague at Athens, and the great pestilences in Florence and London. Out of the furnace of affliction men come either purified or hardened.

I repeat it then, it is not necessarily good for us to meet trouble, but that it is of all things the best and most Christlike, victoriously to endure it.

Permit me, as one whose duty it is to watch for your souls, in view of the great account, to offer you in all humility and affection, some counsels on this momentous subject. In the first place then, believe and lay to heart, and keep constantly before your minds this most certain truth, that whosoever may be the *instruments* of our present troubles, God is the efficient author of them. Hear the word of the Lord which He spoke to His ancient people by His Prophet Amos. "You only have I known among all the families of the earth, therefore will I punish you for all your iniquities." Mark the cause and effect. Because he so peculiarly loved them, He would punish them. And He adds: "Shall the trumpet be blown in the city, and the people not be afraid? Shall there be evil in the city, and the Lord hath not done it?" And so the blessed Jesus said to Pontius Pilot, "Thou couldst have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above." And to the same effect is the message of God to Sennacherib, King of Assyria, by Isaiah the Prophet, saying with regard to that proud King's boasted victories: "Hast thou not heard long ago that I have done it, and of ancient times that I have formed it?" And then he adds: "I will put my hook in thy nose, and my bridle in thy lips, and I will turn thee back by the way by which thou camest." The first requisite to success against our enemies is, reverent obedience towards God, for again as holy scripture sayeth: "When a man's ways please the Lord, He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him." Let us then earnestly and perseveringly seek the favor of Him without

whom our enemies can do us no hurt—without whom not a hair of our heads can fall to the ground. Let us seek His favor by that which He so loudly calls for at this time, by repentance, national and individual, by prayer public and private, by fervent, faithful, constant, prevailing efforts to keep God's holy will and commandments, and to walk in his holy ways. Secondly, we must be careful to cherish unity and mutual affection among ourselves. A censorious, suspicious, denunciatory spirit, always evil, always pernicious, is especially to be deprecated by us at present. Let us avoid as the last, greatest, and most shameful of calamities, a fall into that abyss of misery which engulphed the wretched Jews at Jerusalem, when assailed by enemies from without, and deserted in spirit and counsel by God, they gave themselves over to hating and slaughtering one another.

Again let us, as far as may be, seek to check in ourselves and others the growth of rancorous, vindictive, malignant feeling and the use of bitter, scornful opprobrious language concerning those once our brethren, now, alas, it would seem our enemies. For after all we are Christians, or we have been deceiving ourselves, and the world, and all but God, for a long time. We are the servants of Christ, and our master's eye is upon us in this hour of trial. We are the servants of Christ, and in our master's visible presence we shall soon be. We are the servants of Him who spoke the sermon on the mount. What injunctions does he there give us? What feelings does He there bid us to cherish; what language to use concerning our enemies? We are the servants of Christ—what language did he use to Judas Iscariot when he came to betray Him? What prayer did *He* offer for those who nailed him to the cross? And how shocking does the language of some of our adversaries, and of some of the professed followers, and even ministers of Christ, among our adversaries, appear to us? Shall we imitate them in their faults and sins?

Again, let us take care not to have our minds possessed by this one subject of our national troubles. A man whose thoughts are engrossed by one idea, especially if that be an agitating and exci-

ting idea, is on the verge of insanity. And, already, men heretofore of firm and well-ordered character, have committed suicide from the pressure of this one distracting thought, the troubles of the country. And I have heard already from a certain Lunatic Asylum, (and what is true of it is probably true of all,) that its inmates have recently become much more numerous from the same cause. The best remedy is the calm, soothing, elevating influence of religion. Remember the testimony of the Psalmist, as it is expressed in our prayer-book version: "The Lord is King, be the people never so impatient. He sitteth between the cherubim, be the earth never so unquiet." Acquaint thyself with him, and be at peace. You will be tempted to intermit, or at least diminish the performance of your religious duties. Never yield to that temptation—dread it, abhor it. Never had you such occasion to be fervent in spirit, serving the Lord as now. Be more assiduous than ever heretofore in reading the Scriptures and the works of devout men, in public prayer, and the use of the sacraments, and above all, in your closets, in calling earnestly upon God, yea, importunately beseeching Him to send peace, to advance righteousness, to purify and bless the land, and to prepare us, even by these troubles, to expect and to be ready for His coming. Make prayer more than ever a real communion with God. Temporal deliverance you may well and properly supplicate; indeed it is your duty to ask this, but have still nearer to your souls the deliverance of those souls from sin and obduracy, and worldliness, and bad passions, and His wrath, and eternal death. Cry to Him in the all-prevailing name of Jesus, not for yourself only, but for your country, wretched and imperilled, for the Church weakened in its efforts, uncertain as to the future before it; and cry to Him likewise for those near and dear to you, for husband, brother, father, son, that He would guard and preserve them, body and soul, amid the exceeding fury of this storm which now shakes our land. And lastly, remember that you yourselves are now under trial; that the issues of that trial are for eternity, that though sharp it will be short; and that if you endure to the end you will be saved, and that the sharper the trial endured

the more glorious will be the salvation. And now, dear brethren. what will be the result? Scripture prophesies it, and history prophesies it. Some of you will fail in this time of temptation, and will not endure it. Some of you, I fear, will sacrifice to the passions of the hour the Christian character, and the Christian hope. Some of you will come out of the trial purified and refined, and assured of a brighter crown. Resolve, oh Christian hearer, this day, in God's strength, to which class you will belong; whether to those who will cast away the crown to which perhaps for years they have aspired, or those who hold on to their hope with greater resolution than before.

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